

J WASHINGTON James Reston

The New Collective

WASHINGTON
With the best of intentions, the President's friends are urging him to demonstrate that he's back in charge of the Administration, directing events, pushing his agenda with Congress, ready for televised news conferences and preparing for another summit meeting with Mikhail Gorbachev.

One wonders whether this is a good idea. In the first place it's not true, and merely encourages the illusions that got him into trouble in the first place.

Considering what he has been through in the last few months — the scandals, the investigations, the indictments of his stewardship, another operation and the loss of Congress after a punishing campaign — it's remarkable that a man of his age has held up as well as he has.

He has demonstrated good judgment in rebuilding his White House staff and choosing experienced men to run the National Security Council and the Central Intelligence Agency. He has met with the leaders of Congress in private, and delivered his television speech with his accustomed grace.

Accordingly, there is reason to hope that he can preside over the new reGENCY headed by his chief of staff, Howard Baker, and make the decisions worked out by his Cabinet. But he doesn't need the added stress of pretending that he is now what he never was, a "take-charge" executive.

The Presidential press conference is a good example under the circumstances of unnecessary stress. He has been goaded into it by reporters and it has been accepted reluctantly by the President and his staff. But it takes a couple of days at least to prepare for these televised events, and while he learns something in the process, they prove nothing except that he's a good performer on stage, which everybody knew in the first place.

But an attempt is being made to indicate that the personal and political crisis is over and that things will now go on as before, which is a troubling thought. Howard Baker is partly to blame for this.

On his first day in the White House, he asked reporters: "Is the President fully in control of his Presidency? Is he alert? Is he fully engaged? Is he in contact with the problems? ... You know, it has been a year now since I dealt regularly with Ronald Reagan, but I've never seen him better than he has been today."

Nobody does Ronald Reagan a favor by encouraging him and Congress and the people to believe that he's on top of all these intricate problems. Maybe there isn't a man alive

who could do it, but he can read and listen, watch and judge the issues brought before him for decision.

What is being put in place here for the last two years of the Reagan Administration is a form of collective executive leadership, and it is much better than what we had before. It is not trying to balance the budget with constitutional amendments or tame the Russians with nuclear shields in the sky. It is going one common-sense step at a time, trying to build nonpartisan compromises that will ease the tensions at home and abroad concentrating on the possible instead of dreaming of the impossible.

In short, this less dramatic procedure is more in keeping with the problems of the last two years and it is within the President's physical and mental capacity. It is more moderate, more accountable, more reliable, more in touch with Congress, less stressful and less ideological.

It is odd that some of the noisiest ideological Reaganites like Pat Buchanan and Richard Perle decided to leave the President just when he was in deepest trouble, but the Republic will probably survive their departures. Nothing has caused more confusion here in the last six years than the notion that there is an ideological answer to all our problems.

Don't push Reagan into posturing.

If there is to be another summit meeting on nuclear weapons between President Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev, for example, it will not be approached this time in the careless and mindless way that preceded the last one at Reykjavik, when Congress and the allies were left in the dark, the Cabinet was divided and the Secretary of Defense was left at home.

Summit meetings are not for negotiation but for ceremonial ratification of verifiable agreements reached in advance with the knowledge that they will be confirmed by the Senate.

What we need now is not a hands-on President, but more helping hands: in the White House, in the Cabinet, in Congress and in the press. We have gone through a difficult period, living a life of pretense, but we have got through it in fairly good order, and if the President gets the help he needs in the next two years, he may even get that happy ending he has always wanted. □